

Big Rock Candy Mountain: Travels in Chocolate, Candy Culture, and Kid Creativity

by Zoë Chan

The history: cacao beans and commodities

In *The Social Life of Things*, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai takes a post-Marxist perspective on the commodity, arguing that things can gain and lose their commodity status depending on their context. He posits that, much like people, commodities have an ever-shifting “social potential” in relation to where their respective trajectories may take them.¹ Within this perspective, chocolate offers up a complex and multifaceted itinerary to be traced, from its origins in Meso-America to its current forms within the transnational present. Cacao beans have even served as currency: a price list for produce dating back to 1545 shows that in Haxcela, Mexico, a small rabbit cost thirty cacao beans while a large tomato was valued at one cacao bean.²



The cacao bean has always been processed and presented differently depending on its geographic, socio-economic, and cultural context. In its earliest iterations, its inner flesh was crushed, mixed with water, and then whipped into a frothy unsweetened beverage consumed unheated by Aztec nobility. Spanish imperialists shipped cacao beans back to Europe, where they were subsequently dispersed across the continent and the British Isles. At first an unfamiliar flavour, the drink was considered palatable only once heated and enhanced with sugar, cinnamon, and other spices. By the 1700s, hot chocolate became a popular choice in London coffee houses. A new taste for chocolate created a demand for increased amounts of the cacao bean. During the colonial era, from the 1700s to the 1900s, it was first grown and harvested by indigenous groups in Jesuit-run plantations in Brazil, and subsequently in plantations across the West Indies, along the eastern coast of South America, and in West Africa. Technical advances in the nineteenth century ushered in a new era of cheap large-scale production of chocolate: in 1828, Dutch chemist Coenraad Johanne invented powdered, low-fat chocolate, and in 1879, chocolatier Daniel Peter created milk chocolate by building on Henri Nestlé’s prior innovation of powdered milk from 1867. Once primarily a beverage, chocolate was now produced and packaged as solid bars.³

In the colonial era, chocolate production depended on slavery; even after the supposed abolition of slavery, worker coercion continues in the form of indentured labour. Workers are often paid very little for long hours. Working conditions on plantations are often arduous and dangerous, with labourers exposed to high levels of pesticides and the use of machetes rather than machinery to harvest cacao beans from the fragile plants. Today, cacao bean plantations, particularly in West Africa, are associated with child labour and even slavery.⁴ In response to these issues, the recent fair trade movement aims for transparency in the sourcing of cacao beans, humane labour conditions for the growers, and fair terms of trade and production; however, chocolate with the Fairtrade label makes up a very small share of the market. As Sarah Moss and Alexander Badenoch remind us in *Chocolate: A Global History*, “The chocolate we know is

- 1 See Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3–63.
- 2 Chloé Doutre-Roussel, *The Chocolate Connoisseur* (London: Piatkus, 2005), 19.
- 3 For a detailed history of chocolate, see Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).
- 4 For an in-depth exposé, see journalist Carol Off’s *Bitter Chocolate* (Toronto: Random House, 2006).

it makes me
feel nervous if
makes me think
about apricots.

[...] the product of a world divided between low-paid manual labour and mechanized food preparation, between hungry labourers and sleek consumers, and between the ecologically rich Equatorial nations and the economic powers of Europe and North America.”⁵

Yet, despite its devastatingly brutal links to colonialism and slavery, chocolate is typically associated with pleasure. Chocolate in its various forms is ubiquitous in contemporary (food) culture: available to high- and low-end budgets in gourmet or convenience stores, relished by adults and children alike, and pervasively popular in both prosperous and difficult economic climates.

The framework: art brut and kid knowledge

As a central part of their decade-long collaborative art practice, the artist duo Helen Reed and Hannah Jickling have an ongoing interest in working with young people, both within and outside of the school system. The results are often playful in approach and aesthetic, belying their serious overarching intent to engage with communities often neglected within the art world.⁶ Although their interests are usually framed within the concerns of socially engaged, relational, or pedagogical practices, it is interesting to consider their art practice in relation to the earlier movement of art brut where the drawings of children were considered an important source of inspiration because of their naïve, raw or primal style⁷—qualities seen as virtues within the art brut movement. Pastiche the instinctive, untrained aesthetic of children’s mark-making afforded artists access to new ways of working less bound by existing artistic and societal constraints. Similarly, Jickling expresses enthusiasm for the “feral” qualities of children and describes her interest in working with children as offering a kind of new potential for institutional critique within an art context, while Reed underlines the “utopian” possibilities that working with children inspire for the two artists.⁸

The art historian Michel Thévoz explains that art brut was in part informed by such thinkers as the influential educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) who “saw the child mind not as a still formless outline of the adult mind but as a world with a *structure of its own*.”⁹ In this perspective, children were understood to have a unique way of thinking, creating, and perceiving the world that was worthy of embracing. A comparable perspective on children and their specific subjectivity (though without art brut’s more primitivizing tendencies) is evidenced in more recent writings by the cultural theorist J. Jack Halberstam who describes an intelligence specific to “the pre-socialized, pre-disciplined, pre-restrained anarchic child.”¹⁰ Elaborating on the concept of *kid knowledge*, Halberstam writes that,

childhood, as a space of anarchistic play, a pre-social and pre-normative space of queer revelry [...] has its own forms of knowledge embedded within it and instead of only trying to impose the lessons of adulthood upon kids we should also be trying to extract from kids their goofy and unknowing views of the world....¹¹

Halberstam expands on this notion of kid knowledge through “Gaga feminism”—a kind of political discourse inspired by the child and its embodied virtues, one that “masquerades as naïve nonsense but that actually participates in big and meaningful forms of critique [and] finds inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish.”¹² Halberstam’s idealistic desire to extend the scope of kid knowledge into a larger discursive paradigm echoes Reed’s description of the *utopian*

- 5 Sarah Moss & Alexander Brandoch, *Chocolate: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 7–8.
- 6 Previous projects involving children are *Your Lupines or Your Life* or *Upside-down and Backwards*. See Helen Reed’s website: <http://www.reheardregalement.com>.
- 7 Art brut also displays primitivist tendencies in its followers’ adherence to “exoticism, the primitive, and folklore” as part of their “endeavors for a return to liberating sources.” —Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 13.
- 8 Quoted from presentation by Jickling and Reed at the 5th Vancouver Art Book Fair, October 15, 2016.
- 9 Michel Thévoz, *Art Brut* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 11. My italics.
- 10 J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon, 2012), xxiii–xxiv.
- 11 Quoted in Claire Potter, “Kid Knowledge: An Interview with J. Jack Halberstam (Part II),” *Tenured Radical* (December 27, 2012). <http://www.chronicle.com/blognetwork/tenuredradical/2012/12/kid-knowledge-an-interview-with-j-jack-halberstam-part-ii/>
- 12 Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, xxv.



Thunder with
green apple

potential of working with kids.

What, then, can be learned from children, and how can this knowledge be applied critically and creatively? Halberstam's concept of kid knowledge encourages us to ask such questions in contemplating Jickling and Reed's ambitious project *Big Rock Candy Mountain*.

The project: chocolate creation, candy currency, and taste

In a promotional email for the project, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* is described as “a candy factory¹³ in an East Vancouver elementary school where Hannah and [Helen] research taste & flavor-making alongside elementary school students”¹⁴). Commissioned by Vanessa Kwan, a curator for Other Sights for Artists' Projects, a local initiative focused on presenting temporary public art, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* is also framed as a non-monumental public art work. For the project, Jickling and Reed spent the four months between March and June in 2016 making regular visits to a grade 4–5 class at Queen Alexandra Elementary School and getting to know the children. Wanting to go beyond the student-teacher relationships with which the kids were already familiar, Jickling and Reed arrived dressed as jellybeans on their first visit. In this way, they quickly established the colourful tone and energy of *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, one that encouraged play, humour, and imagination, irreverence and unpredictability.

A primary focus of the project involved the exploration of the worlds of the kids in order to understand what they liked and didn't like, how they thought and spoke, what made them excited and less so—all through the medium of candy and with an emphasis on chocolate. Jickling & Reed concentrated on identifying, inventorying, and iterating their young collaborators' tastes through a series of taste-testing experiments, exercises, discussions, fieldtrips, and surveys. The project culminated with the children developing a one-off series of chocolate bars in accordance with their individual tastes and the artists creating an edible chocolate edition of artist multiples. For the chocolate production, Jickling and Reed, in conjunction with Other Sights, approached East Van Roasters, a local social enterprise whose values align with the artists' socially inflected practice. As a bean-to-bar producer and shop, East Van Roasters is known for their use of organic, Fairtrade beans from Peru, Madagascar and the Dominican Republic, as well as their seasonal ingredient combos that range from the healthy-sounding sunflower seeds and bee pollen to the more classic espresso and vanilla bean.

As the many informal surveys conducted by Jickling and Reed attest, the students' tastes ran the gamut, and their responses were often delightful in their frank quirkiness. In one questionnaire based on the taste testing of various candies and other foodstuffs, students responded on a scale from bad to good, describing how they visualized the taste, what the food reminded them of, and what emoji it evoked. One student enthused that sour cherry Nerds reminded her of “the carnival” and gummy worms of “swimming.” Tamarind, which tasted unpleasant to another student, said it reminded her of her distaste for olives, while dried lemon rind evoked roses. Other questionnaires broke down the tastes of candies based on the senses, asking the students to consider not only what they tasted but also heard, smelled, touched, felt, and imagined. Many of the children favoured the enhanced, artificially produced flavours of sour and sweet typically found in candy.

Taking the children seriously as cultural producers and tastemakers with

13 Jickling and Reed's idea to create a candy factory dedicated to the invention and development of extraordinary confections inevitably calls to mind Roald Dahl's famous book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) and its associated films. Beyond the realm of fiction however, the creative and exploratory spirit of *Big Rock Candy Mountain* shares parallels with that of scientific laboratories where major innovations took place in the early twentieth century, as is described in Samira Kawash, *Candy: A Century of Panic and Pleasure* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2013). A focus on candy within the world of “sugar science” first exploded in the 1920s and really came to the fore in the 1950s, as “researchers discovered more ways of converting starches into sugar and developed practical processes for producing such sugars for commercial use.” (43) These scientific discoveries were then applied to serve the primary objectives of candy makers: “variety, novelty, deliciousness.” (25). Kawash highlights that candy was at the forefront of the larger modern-day revolution of processed foods, which changed “traditional assumptions of what to eat, when to eat, and how to eat it.” (25).

14 Email from Helen Reed, October 11, 2016.

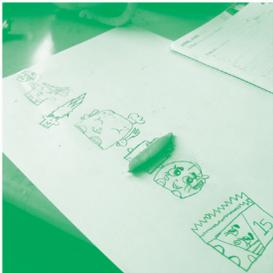


a potential for creativity but also for business, Jickling and Reed asked the students to think not only about the taste of chocolate, but also its production, packaging, and branding, which they explored in class as well as field trips to East Van Roasters. On one of these visits, each child made three chocolate bars with their own choice of ingredients including a selection of kid-friendly gummy worms and carbonated candy Pop Rocks as well as the more “adult” flavours of golden cherries and barberries. They also designed and decorated the wrappers for their chocolate (with names like “Axe-You-Some-Chocolate” and “Amazing Ambrose Bar”) and reflected on their target market (the scope of the responses ranged from the modestly micro-niche—“Nicholas, Edwin, Linden”—to the ambitiously global—“All the kids in the world!”). The children were asked to consider, on a small scale, how chocolate is produced, processed, and packaged into a sellable commodity, before sharing their creations as gifts with friends and family. Their individually wrapped and decorated chocolate bars in conjunction with some of the kids’ drawings were also exhibited in a hallway display case at their school for their parents and peers to admire.

In his seminal book *Distinction*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses how personal taste is fundamentally shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors.¹⁵ While Bourdieu’s perspective on taste can be disheartening for its pessimistic view of the impossibility of escaping one’s fate as a socialized subject, Jickling and Reed encourage the potential for individual agency on the part of the students in *Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Although working with children is clearly inspiring for the two artists, they do not share art brut’s idealizing conception of the child as an uncorrupted entity. While the artists of that early twentieth-century movement may have romantically envisaged children living in a state of innocence, Jickling and Reed acknowledge that the children are susceptible to popular culture, influenced by ads, convenience store candy, and toy trends, and savvy with smartphones and emojis. Neither does Jickling and Reed’s project overlook candy’s historic and ongoing links to capitalism—they describe Big Rock Candy Mountain as a “factory” after all. Since the emergence of candy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, specialty shops would sell sweets for pennies, effectively training children to become adult consumers.¹⁶ At the same time, such stores notably “became the place for children to socialize, often away from parental control.”¹⁷

Owing to its highly processed content including elevated levels of sugar, candy is negatively considered a “fake food” that openly “proclaims its allegiance to the artificial, the processed, the unhealthy.”¹⁸ Conversely, in her fascinating essay titled, “Confections, Concoctions and Conceptions,” Allison James offers up a less pejorative view of candy, arguing that children’s relationship with candy enables them to distinguish themselves from the adult world and to create their own identity. This is often defined in active contradiction of the tastes of their adult counterparts, where “something which is despised and regarded [...] as inedible by the adult world should be given great prestige as a particularly desirable form of food by the child.”¹⁹ In her discussion of the culture around the buying, eating, and sharing of candy, James explains that candy is “the child’s food, the food over which he has a maximum of control.”²⁰ But it is not just a matter of being a cheap commodity attainable by children with small pocket money budgets, it is symbolic of the child’s world as James points out: “By eating that which is ambiguous in adult terms the child establishes an alternate system of meaning which adults cannot perceive. It is this which allows the culture of childhood to flourish largely unnoticed

- 15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 16 Elizabeth Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008), 357.
- 17 Kate Hopkins, *Sweet Tooth: The Bittersweet History of Candy* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2012), 224.
- 18 Samira Kawash, *Candy: A Century of Panic and Pleasure* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2013), 25.
- 19 Allison James, “Confections, Concoctions and Conceptions (1982), Daniel Miller, ed., *Consumption: Critical concepts in the social sciences, vol. IV* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 74.
- 20 Ibid 82.



by adults and, at the same time, to exist largely beyond their control.”²¹

The product: SOUR VS SOUR, diversions, and paths

Jickling and Reed, in contrast, chose to focus on this often ignored culture of children and candy in Big Rock Candy Mountain. Their “compilation” chocolate bar SOUR VS SOUR is an attempt to pack everything gleaned from working with the students into a single unit. Evoking the children’s overriding penchant for extreme acidic tastes in their favourite candies, SOUR VS SOUR is composed of the synthetic flavours of lemonade and wild cherry Nerds pitted against the more earthy flavours of dried cherries and lemon rind, embedded into opposing halves of a bar of dark chocolate.²² Bright yellow constellations of Nerds assertively “pop” in contrast with the dried fruit and rind whose more muted palette melds easily with that of the chocolate base. In this way, SOUR VS SOUR playfully crystallizes the tension between child and adult tastes described by James. To eat the chocolate bar is to partake in and extend the long-term exercise in taste initiated by the artists and their young collaborators during the entirety of *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, but perhaps also to confirm or question one’s existing taste.

SOUR VS SOUR mimics the look of commercial bars with its aluminum wrapper and jagged-cut edges (these jagged edges were a recurring feature in many of the children’s drawings of candy bars). In conspicuous contrast with the discreet brown cardboard boxes East Van Roasters uses, Jickling and Reed instead aim for the look of cheap candy wrappers that typically feature clashing colours and a mishmash of flashy fonts. It is interesting to point out that information on labels for high end chocolate bars are usually laid out in a portrait orientation (e.g. Green & Black’s), while their low-priced counterparts are laid out in landscape (e.g. Snickers). In this way, the distinction between high and low culture, expensive and cheap, adult and child taste, is thus quickly signaled by the wrapper layout alone.²³ Jickling and Reed abide by the latter convention in their choice of packaging design, spelling out SOUR VS SOUR in cute bubble letters—a typeface also used in the branding of the popular Sour Patch Kids candies—across the length of the chocolate wrapper. As the world of candy commerce dictates, the packaging is as important as the product itself. Less concerned about driving up sales and more about celebrating their collaboration with the elementary school however, the packaging for SOUR VS SOUR showcases details of the children’s drawings (mostly renderings of emojis), describes the project, and names all of the students individually. When the class first saw the artists’ chocolate bars, they responded with excitement (“We’re going to be famous!” and “It’s so beautiful!”); others had more mercenary concerns about its distribution (“Will people be able to buy this?”).

To return to Arjun Appadurai’s take on commodities introduced at the beginning of this essay, it is relatively rare for commodities to remain within a single context; instead as is the case with the itinerant cacao bean, they are often found in circulation, crossing the boundaries of one context to another. He maintains that “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. . . .”²⁴ In this light, SOUR VS SOUR allows for multiple meanings, refusing to stay statically still, with a trajectory that moves in and out of various contexts: from plantation to local roasters to elementary school classroom to chocolate workshops to being launched and sold as an artist multiple at art book fairs, at Queen Alexandra Elementary School, at the East Van Roasters shop, and online. Moreover, presented

21 Ibid 84.

22 This choice also recalls the Nerds packaging itself; since its appearance on the market in 1983, the Nerds’ candy box comprises the juxtaposition of two flavours that are separated from each other, accessible only from two openings on opposite ends of the box.

23 Moss & Brandoch 105.

24 Appadurai 5.



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Other Sights

as a public artwork within the curatorial framework of Other Sights, SOUR VS SOUR challenges the prevailing notion that a public artwork is a highly visible, enduring material presence occupying a single site. In contrast to this traditional conception of public art, SOUR VS SOUR is intimately small, can be sold, stored or gifted, and, as an edible product, is not meant to last.

As a product, SOUR VS SOUR is peripatetic; it includes mass-produced materials (the contents of several boxes of Nerds candy) but is hand-made as a small run of chocolate bars at East Van Roasters (each batch at around 65 to 75 chocolate bars), made with beans sourced from Madagascar. The foil wrappers were industrially printed, but as the artists could not find a company willing to package such small batches, the artists, with the help of a small team, individually wrap each chocolate bar (in a time-consuming process involving double-sided tape, binder clips, a heat-sealing machine, and pinking shears). In contrast with the slick veneer of the metallic wrapper, hand-drawn renderings of emojis by each of the children—each of whom is individually mentioned—decorate the surface.

While the final product of packaged chocolate bar is clearly inspired by the children’s tastes, the selling price, in line with the products usually sold by East Van Roasters (about seven dollars) is out of reach for the kids who usually pay a dollar or two for candy at the convenience store. To counter this, SOUR VS SOUR will be sold at a special rate, below the actual cost of production materials, within their school. (All monetary proceeds will go to fundraising for future projects with students, thus benefiting the school and the children). At the same time, as an artist multiple, launched within the art world at the 2016 Vancouver Art Book Fair, SOUR VS SOUR is inexpensive, offering the artists little potential for monetary gain. Jickling and Reed play thus with the art milieu’s unspoken rules of the game, destabilizing its systems of value through their creation of a chocolate bar that “zigzags” in and out of commodity status.

Appadurai discusses his notion of “diversions” wherein commodities are *strategically* removed from a usually closed enclave to another, writing that, “The diversion of commodities from their customary paths brings in the new.”²⁵ He adds that diversions can become in themselves “new paths, paths that will in turn inspire new diversions.”²⁶ Through their appropriation of the chocolate bar from the market place into classroom and art contexts, Jickling and Reed propose new paths for contemporary artistic practices, including their direct engagement with the marketplace via chocolate production and by collaborating with children as a central part of their art practice.²⁷ Resulting from ongoing conversations with Other Sights as its commissioning body as well as negotiations with the East Van Roasters and the students and staff of Queen Alexandra Elementary School, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* does not fit easily into the conventions of the contemporary art milieu’s often top-down or unidirectional modus operandi towards its publics and partners. It reveals that not only are children profoundly impacted by their surrounding culture, but they themselves can influence and contribute to this culture. Additionally, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* raises a number of larger questions about new approaches of working, engaging, and collaborating with young people: What is the potential of artists working with children? How can artists encourage agency and authorship in collaborations with young people? How can we support children to become valued creators in themselves? And, how might such projects lead to new types of interactions within art milieus and beyond?

25 Appadurai 29.
26 Ibid.
27 Presented within the context of Other Sights’ mandate, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* also pushes the parameters of what can be considered public art.

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